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ABSTRACT

As college and university administrators appraise speech and debate activity, their responses clearly affect the strength and survival of local programs. The director or coach of a debate team must help decision-makers see the educational, social, and personal relevance of forensics. Public presentations of debates that begin with a round of competition can expand to include audience debates, demonstration debates and/or the presentation of individual speaking and interpretation events for specific campus-community groups. Audience members from the student body, faculty, and administration not only learn about the nature of forensics, but they can also profit from hearing diverse approaches to topics of public interest and the presentation of works of literary value. Service experience involves debate team members presenting programs for banquets, debates for alumni groups, and speaking and performing for convocation, graduation, and homecoming events, as well as for local schools, churches, and civic organizations. Members may also serve as guest speakers or readers for courses in education, English composition, business, or sociology. State, regional, and national tournaments offer outlets for individual and team achievements that contribute to a program's reputation. The team's forensic journal, as a type of newsletter, bulletin board, and source of information about forensics, allows student team members to reach out to a wide range of supportive readers. An annual forensics banquet for team members and parents, administrators, alumni, and supportive community friends can also serve as an important unifying force of the program. (CR)

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Forensics as a Cooperative Agent:

Building a Tradition within an Academic Community

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Forensics as a Cooperative Agent:
Building a Tradition within an Academic Community

Throughout my experience as a director of forensics, I have been fascinated with the perceptions of speech activity that are often voiced by community citizens and colleagues within the academy. Reflecting a diversity of viewpoints, appraisals express a blend of admiration and confusion about the nature and mission of forensics. Some educators frequently express appreciation for speech and debate participation benefits that influence the interpersonal, academic and professional development of undergraduate students. Others reflect positive but guarded perceptions of the activity based upon the credibility and performance of team members and coaches as they function in university classrooms or in campus roles.

In their informal evaluations of forensics, educators also comment upon the limited visibility of speech programs; they mention the isolation of speech-debate in comparison to major campus sports, theatre performances, or choral productions that appeal to large and enthusiastic public audiences. In his discussion of the need for forensics to overcome its isolation, Michael Bartanen (1993) identifies factors that hinder the integration of the activity within the university community. He notes that forensic educators may be isolated on their campuses and that "forensics education may be hidden from view, taking place after 'business hours'" (p. 8). Bartanen concludes that forensics should not be seen narrowly as "a form of student training, which does not involve social obligations" (p. 9). "Instead," he writes, "we need to work harder at creating articulate

citizens" (p. 9).

Specifically, as college and university administrators appraise speech and debate activity, their responses clearly affect the strength and survival of local programs. Importantly, administrative perceptions become a part of assessment, which is often accompanied by decisions affecting financial support. Speaking as a department administrator, Joseph Cardot (1991) describes the supporting foundation for forensics and how the activity is assessed by department leadership on numerous campuses when he writes: "The support received from administrative and academic sources allows the activity to continue. The extent of that continuance depends upon the perceptions of the governing bodies and the visibility of the students participating" (81). Cardot underscores clear implications of perception-funding dimensions for forensic educators when he concludes: "The director or coach of today must help decision-makers see the educational, social, and personal relevance of forensics" (81).

To be effective in their educational communities, forensics programs cannot assume friendly receptions and appraisals in academic environments where a wide range of activities compete for attention, recognition and essential funding. Without the impact that comes from large public audiences often stereotyped as influential, forensics programs need to communicate their messages; they must "sell" their educational features; they cannot operate in isolation. Thus, the following discussion will explore standard practices as well as novel approaches for enhancing forensics as a tradition within the campus-community while also contributing to the academic and personal growth of participants.

Although forensics programs may encourage speech-debate tournaments to include guests as observers, tournament operation assistants or judges, the academic community's observation of and involvement with forensics can become far more extensive. While the possibilities for expanding the collegiate community's awareness of forensics are as varied as individual speech-debate programs, a number of options for communicating beyond the focus upon tournament competition invite exploration. These dimensions, when established, soon function as parts of a program's tradition within the academic community.

Public Programs

Public presentations of debates that begin with hearing a round of competition can expand to include audience debates, demonstration debates and/or the presentation of individual speaking and interpretation events for specific campus-community groups. While my position as a forensic educator emphasizes that any debate format can and should adapt easily and quickly to diverse audiences, a number of new or revived debate options have strong potential to stimulate public interest. For example, parliamentary debate, NEDA debate, and numerous Lincoln Douglas formats demonstrate increasing potential when presented as public programs for campus audiences or when tournament rounds are promoted for public and campus guests to attend.

A traditional and frequent emphasis on the Southwest Baptist University campus includes the presentation of forensic evenings. Individual programs, arranged informally or with printed agendas, often include a variety of speech and interpretation events that

may or may not travel to tournament competition. On some occasions, the program will feature a broad theme such as the interpretation of drama or persuasive speaking. At other times, the evening may be devoted to presentations by novice speakers.

By including a public program emphasis, forensic activity can reinforce the premise that participants need experience in communicating with a variety of audiences. The dimension allows speech team members to observe how the requirements of the public setting can reinforce the goals of competitive speaking while requiring adaptation and sensitivity that may not be experienced in competitive rounds.

There is additional justification for the public presentation emphasis as an integral part of a forensic tradition. As noted in a prior presentation (1995), my experience affirms that a speech program evolves as a stable co-curricular activity as it builds audience awareness and diversity (p. 10). Further, if a program's focus is inward or only toward the tournament setting, the isolation means the experiences of speakers are limited and "training can actually develop around unrealistic premises" (p. 10). Robert Weiss, while emphasizing the importance of audience diversity for debate training, shares advice that can apply to individual events speakers as well as collegiate debaters when he writes: "Remember also that we do not have to stick to students or members of our own organization for participant in public debating" (pp. 29-30). He continues: "No matter how well prepared the students are, the debate may benefit from the inclusion of interested and knowledgeable individuals from all walks of life" (p. 30).

As the forensics team relates to campus audiences through performance programs,

reading hours and public debates, the program also gains the advantages of involvement and recognition from the campus community. Audience members from the student body, faculty, and administration not only learn about the nature of forensics, but they can also profit from hearing diverse approaches to topics of public interest and the presentation of works of literary value.

Squad Meetings as Campus Occasions

My experience reveals that one of the most rewarding means of integrating forensics within the campus community is the design of team workshop sessions to include public attendance and involvement. At weekly meetings of the forensics team at Southwest Baptist, college roommates, dates, staff members, and even visiting parents are invited to attend. Each meeting is publicized and printed on the university calendar so that team members and guests will know meeting times. Since there are always events to perform or a practice round to hear and evaluate, guests are encouraged to listen and provide helpful feedback.

The open forensics meeting has the advantage of communicating with the campus community. It provides the setting for building interest in the competitive aspects of speech and debate while recruiting support for on-campus projects and tournaments, and it introduces guests and team members to the wide variety of speaking and performance options. After hearing the presentations of a typical work session, visiting students and guests of the Southwest Baptist team often comment, "Now I know what forensics students do." Others ask how they can become involved in participation.

Another advantage derived from including guests in weekly meetings is that team members can experience the presence of a non-threatening audience as an environment for productive practice. Squad members can benefit from the presence of guests who are invited to record or voice constructive evaluations of events in progress. On occasions, the evening's agenda for our team will focus upon segments of speeches such as introductions or the supporting material used in developing manuscripts. At other times, students preparing new events are encouraged by opportunities to present first segments of speeches or to test a piece of literature for its hearability.

For squad members, the team meeting with the "public" dimension serves as a workshop environment providing an impetus for growth through performance opportunities. Educationally, the setting partially meets the need identified by Kathleen Hall Jamieson when she speaks of the decline of occasions for speech development. Jamieson writes that "history tells us that a suitable education and adequate practice will facilitate the production of eloquence" (p. 16). However, she explains that "at the moment, neither is easily attained in the United States" (p. 16). Jamieson concludes that "with the loss of occasions requiring speech, the aspiring speaker's ability to polish individual skills is minimized" (p. 16). Clearly, the open team workshop can contribute to meeting the needs of developing speakers by providing the audience context that encourages growth through repeated performance opportunities. As it fosters the development of communication skills of individual speakers, the open workshop also becomes a team and campus tradition.

Serving the University Community

While advocating that forensics can exist across the curriculum, Gene Kerns reminds speech educators that "forensics is not a spectator sport" (p. 195). In addition, Kerns insists that promoting forensic service programs within the university community "might turn out to be much more than positive public relations; it might be a matter of survival" (p. 195). My experience affirms that while it is possible for forensics to focus primarily upon the sponsorship of students as they prepare events for tournament competition, the growing program in today's competitive educational "market" cannot afford the consequences of a singular competitive focus. Despite the energy and time demands associated with attempting to meet the speech performance-service needs of a college or university, the active forensics squad can find reward in viewing service as a means of expanding and enriching its program.

A forensic tradition of service is also enhanced when a speech program goes public via active responses to campus needs and opportunities. Examples of "service" experiences involving students from the Southwest Baptist team include squad members presenting programs for banquets, debates for senior citizen alumni groups, and speaking and performing for occasions including convocation, graduation, and homecoming celebrations. Other service outlets include judging oral and written communication events sponsored by campus organizations and serving as tutors for students preparing presentations for campus audiences. In brief, the willingness of team members to assist in meeting needs of the educational community fosters the identification of the team as more than a group of competitors. Through service, team members can be known as

effective communicators who are also willing to share their skills and talents.

Of course, service within the collegiate setting can quickly expand to include the larger community in which the university participates. For example, with a willingness to assist local schools, churches and civic organizations with program needs, the service boundaries of the local program expand even more. Additionally, as Ella Shaw (1995) observed in support of public relations efforts for high school forensics, sending speakers to civic organizations "not only provides students with varied speaking forums, it can also encourage donations" (p. 54).

Enriching the University Curriculum

The forensics program can also provide needed enrichment for specific courses. For instance, a standard tradition for members of the Southwest Baptist team includes speakers volunteering to present events and speeches as laboratory illustrations for courses in oral communication. Student speeches are frequently used by instructors to reinforce principles relating to the organization of messages, the gathering-utilization of supporting material, and the management of language and delivery.

On a broader scale, team members can make contributions to courses outside departments of speech or communication. For example, as guest speakers or readers for courses in areas such as education, English composition, business or sociology, students can present prepared events and/or literary works while also serving as ambassador-representatives for their forensics program.

Educational Strategies in Tradition Building

While the above program traditions depend upon the insight and influence of the forensics director for their implementation, a number of additional choices are closely linked to philosophical and operational decisions of the directing-coaching leadership. These dimensions include an emphasis upon student-speaker learning, the use of tradition to inspire achievement, and the strategy of communicating forensic values and accomplishments with administrative and educational leadership.

1. A primary strategy in tradition building must focus upon promoting the educational nature of forensics. While large spectator activities emphasize values such as entertainment, cooperation and sportsmanship, forensics programs can and should capitalize upon building a tradition of learning for participants and audiences. As C. T. Hanson (1991) noted in his exploration of expectations of forensic educators, "our mission as a coach or program director ought to encompass the notion of letting learning take place in the program" (p. 6). To reach this objective, he concludes, "learning must be a valued priority of the program" (pp. 6-7). Since few activities can compete with a sound forensics program as a means of assisting inquirers to discover and communicate their knowledge through a combination of competitive and noncompetitive outlets, the strategy of "selling" this objective can underscore a positive feature-tradition within the academic community.

2. In numerous settings, an important strategy in building a tradition is to recognize and utilize the maxim that success begets success. Certainly, a unique feature of forensics as an activity is that diverse categories exist for achieving success and

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reinforcement. State, regional, and numerous national tournaments offer outlets for individual and team achievements that contribute to a program's reputation. While these outlets for "winning" achievements can help to establish or maintain a tradition, publication of the academic and professional success of program graduates, recognition of past and present team members involved in campus-community leadership, and the publication of services provided by the speech team also contribute to a tradition of success within the academic community.

An added feature of a tradition of achievement is that it can be developed by a specific forensics squad at a variety of levels. My emphasis is that records of past speakers and teams should serve as inspiration and models for present competitors, but they should not intimidate new, developing speakers as they prepare and compete. Even if a speech program is newly organized, the possibility of "building" a new tradition can be a positive motivation. Additionally, my repeated position is that while teams and individuals need appropriate traditions, each group must build its own"teamness" and sense of achievement. Each team member must feel that she/he can contribute to the team's tradition and success.

3. Just as successful speech teams are characterized by open and professional relationships between forensic educators and individual competitors, forensics programs profit from a tradition of on-going communication with the entire university community. To accomplish this goal, the forensics director and his or her coaching colleagues must fill responsible roles in building an open dialogue. Specific acts such as sending messages, gathering feedback and affirming interpersonal relationships require time and

sensitivity. However, giving priority to duties such as sending reports and expressing appreciation is not only a responsibility reflecting respect and courtesy, but the practice can have a lasting impact upon the reputation and tradition of the program. Clearly, the forensic educator's ability to communicate on campus plays a critical role in the program's credibility among educational colleagues and administrators.

A tradition of communicating with the educational community can and should provide essential information about the nature, goals, and achievements of a particular forensics program. Specifically, I continue to learn that reports to administrators and faculty are more effective if they include information about the philosophical and educational features of the activity. I recall the advice of Don Faules, Richard Rieke and Jack Rhodes (1978) as they explain how publicity should include more than reports of accomplishments. Instead, as these educators have noted, "the communication effort should also candidly include, when directed toward colleagues, news of temporary reverses, educational experimentation, and whatever developments the director believes would be of interest to other professionals in related fields" (p. 102).

Importantly, the tradition of communicating with the educational community should not be limited to messages from the director to educational colleagues. Instead, as Foules, Rieke an Rhodes have observed, "the director should listen to and assimilate advice which colleagues may give about the program and should seek ways to relate his concerns to those of his colleagues" (p. 102). In agreement, I recall that some of the most insightful advice for enriching the Southwest Baptist program comes from faculty, administrators, alumni and community members genuinely committed to a forensics

program. Certainly, the willingness to listen and welcome feedback not only serves to enrich a program, but I find that contributions from supporters can frequently develop as traditional elements because they represent a sense of partnership in building and maintaining the program.

Finally, I note two examples from the Southwest Baptist forensics program that illustrate efforts to strengthen communication within the academic community while contributing to the forensic tradition of the local program. First, a student writing effort continues to focus upon the publication of the team's forensic journal. As a type of newsletter, bulletin board, and source of information about alumni and the changing world of forensics, the publication allows student team members to reach out to a wide range of supportive readers. While the journal depends upon faculty advice, it remains the student forensic voice seeking to preserve the program's traditions while also communicating with alumni, faculty, administration and community about goals and challenges of the program.

A second traditional element, the annual forensics banquet, has its roots in the program's beginning. As a feature of the university calendar, the event brings team members, administrators, alumni, parents of the team and supportive community friends to celebrate the educational features of forensics. From its roots as an event for the team of less than ten persons, the banquet-program now hosts approximately 150 persons each spring. Since the forensics team and its leadership are committed to interaction with the university's administration and faculty, a key consideration in planning the banquet includes arranging for attendance of university officials and staff. Additionally, the

banquet serves as an important unifying force of the program as it preserves past traditions and solicits support for future educational goals.

Conclusion

This essay has focused upon forensics as a cooperative dimension in the university community. With an emphasis upon making speech activity more visible, attention has been given to practices that can promote tradition building and thus enhance the development of forensics programs. Specific dimensions explored have included the use of public programs, the open team workshop, university service and curriculum enrichment. Suggested educational strategies with potential to influence tradition building and cooperation have included the emphasis upon learning, the use of success to inspire success, and reminders for enhancing communication with educational leadership. Certainly, as forensic educators seek to build active and rewarding programs, the development of traditions that strengthen cooperation and communication with the academic community remains a theme worthy of continued exploration.

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